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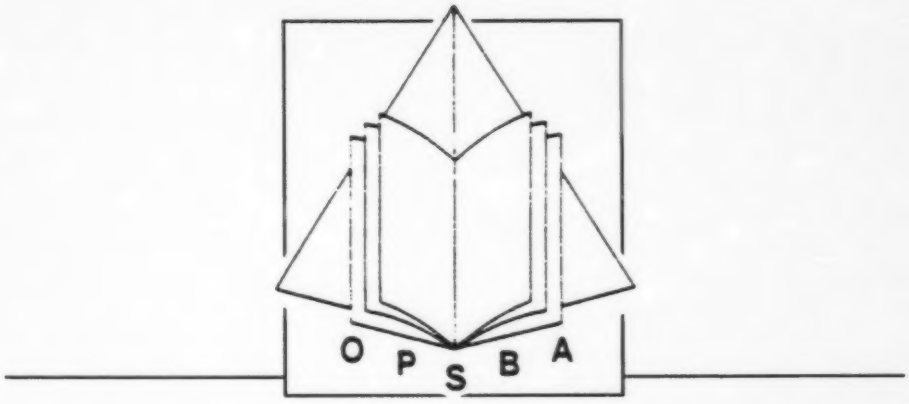
ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

TORONTO OFFICE: 439 UNIVERSITY AVE. 18TH FLOOR TORONTO, ONT. M5G 1Y8 TEL: (416) 340-2540 FAX. (416) 340-7571
NORTHERN REGION OFFICE: P.O. BOX 3110 NORTH BAY, ONT. P1B 8H1 TEL: (705) 472-5230 FAX: (705) 472-7046
SUDBURY OFFICE: ECOLE PUBLIQUE JEANNE SAUVE 296 VAN HORNE ST SUDBURY, ONT. P3B 1H9 TEL: (705) 671-9930 FAX: (705) 671-9931



A BLUEPRINT FOR REACHING OUT

PREPARED BY

THE COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT

OF THE

ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

MAY, 1989

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Director of Communications has prepared a report, entitled "A Blueprint for Reaching Out". This report recommends a three to four year province-wide strategy in which the Association would assist Member Boards in reaching out to their publics and sustain, or where need be, improve public support for public education.

The report focuses on two major, non-commercial communications mediums to meet the strategy -- electronic (cable T.V. and public service radio) and print (weekly newspaper columns, tax bill inserts and a calendar). Some parts of the program may involve financial contributions from participating Member Boards while other aspects of the program could be completed with no additional costs to Member Boards above their annual Association membership fees.

The report suggests that current and new forces in the Ontario education system have made it essential for public school boards to convey their messages directly to their taxpayers, users and other supporters and not leave it to other forces, school systems or the uncontrollable and unreliable news media.

The following report and recommendations were approved by the Board of Directors in May, 1989. A proposal package for presentation to Member Boards should be completed by mid October.

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INTRODUCTION

The Director of Communications undertook to explore, develop and recommend a comprehensive public relations program, complete with a strategy and set of activities, for the Ontario Public School Boards' Association and its Member Boards.

The process began with an assessment of the internal and external public relations activities of the three founding trustee associations prior to amalgamation. We also reviewed the efforts of the Ontario Public Education Network. Although its work over the last two years has been more political than public relations, OPEN's brush with large scale distribution of public education promotional materials far exceeded any such efforts of OPSBA, or the three previous trustee associations.

We also reviewed the **corporate objectives** of the newly amalgamated Association to determine what, if any, public affairs programs or services were contemplated when the new organization was mapped out.

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Next, consideration was given to the Association's primary client -- member school boards. "Member Board" is a generic term that for the purposes of this report has been refined to mean "public school trustees". True, the Association does serve school board staff and they in turn serve the Association, but its main mission and accountability rests with publicly elected school trustees. Trustees are members of OPSBA by virtue of a public school board's affiliation with OPSBA.

Several questions needed to be asked and examined. What is OPSBA, or any other organization doing to reach public school trustees and/or help them reach their publics? What boards are involved in public relations activities? To what degree and what are the successes and failures of these boards?

Finally, considerable time was spent evaluating the effectiveness of public relations programs, strategies and activities in both public and private sector organizations and companies. This investigation also included extensive discussions with a variety of public relations, advertising, consulting and lobbying agencies and companies. Some of these companies had previous experience with school boards, or the education field in general, while others had little or no exposure to the education market.

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Several meetings followed with top public relations professionals on staff in companies stretching from Shell Canada, to the Canadian Bankers' Association, to the Industrial Accident Prevention Association, to mention just a few.

As a result of this investigation, one thing is certain - all these companies have problems in their public affairs programs. Some lack **money** (some have too much), some lack **creativity**, others lack a **clear focus** and **theme** and others still have poor **implementation.**

We were particularly impressed with one small company -- **Ad-Venture Communications.** Their staff helped enormously in the preparation and presentation of this report, at no cost to the Association. They also assisted me in understanding that, knowing what is needed is just as important as knowing how to get it. Moreover, big P.R. budgets do not always mean big P.R. results. The staff at Ad-Venture helped identify ways in which OPSBA can obtain key public relations and communication goals and challenges, while keeping in mind the realities of limited financial resources to support these activities.

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WHY PUBLIC RELATIONS?

In Ontario, local trustees are responsible to local taxpayers for education. Trustees are empowered to set an annual budget and the municipalities are required to collect taxes from property owners and pass this money over to school boards. The system has worked well until the pressures of modern day society came into play. Since Hall-Denis, the baby boom and the technical explosion, more and more demands and accompanying costs have impacted upon the public school system. To further complicate matters, we now have an aging population, who are left with an increasingly heavy tax burden on their property.

In an age of rampant dissemination of information by every known entity, commercial and otherwise, the burden of winning public support for education costs becomes an enormous challenge. To falter is to create a vacuum which will quickly be filled by other purveyors of education.

OPSBA must face up to competitive forces who have developed active communications resources. Unless elected trustees wish only to witness further attacks on public education, they would be wise to put forth their story regularly and efficiently. The protectors of public education cannot afford to refrain from explaining their need and their prudent use of municipal taxes.

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A NEW BEGINNING

Two critical challenges of an immediate nature now face our new organization.

The Association requires a profile in the education community and, in particular, among its Member Boards. Considerable trustee and staff time has been and likely will continue to be directed toward internal Association matters and organization problem-solving.

To be successful however, OPSBA cannot just maintain -- the expectations are too high and the potential is too great. Simply being "united" will not sustain strong support and enthusiasm from trustees. Alternatively, there needs to be in place a program of activities, perhaps more appropriately called services, which must be so useful and creative that, if for no other reason, Member Boards would believe that their membership fee is justifiable.

There are of course many other reasons that demonstrate OPSBA's usefulness to Member Boards.

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Building a strong, far reaching political lobby for public school boards and creating a vibrant organizational base from which trustees determine policy and speaking out to their publics are three more of many justifiable reasons for OPSBA. OPSBA is, however, just beginning to create and refine the internal apparatus to deliver on these and other services.

In the meantime, the educational community and OPSBA's Member Boards are watching and waiting.

One of the greatest challenges facing public school boards is communicating with their public about education -- in all its aspects and in all its splendor. A close appraisal of their individual successes and failures in this challenge leads to a variety of conclusions -- some bad, some average and some good. You do not need to look very closely at the previous efforts of provincial school board associations' endeavours to conclude that very little was done to assist school boards with this critical and important task.

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There are some very important factors that help explain this lack of assistance over the years. Insufficient and divided resources and a splintered focus are perhaps some of the major factors. However, a successful amalgamation will contribute to sharing of resources, a common focus, partnership and trust. In fact there are some very clear signals that this has already started.

OPSBA has the ability to create, implement and coordinate a comprehensive, short and long term, province-wide plan to assist Member Boards with their ongoing dialogue with their public about the Ontario public education system. We have the spokespeople in place (almost 2,000 elected public school trustees), and there is no shortage of messages that must be delivered.

Meanwhile, the public is standing by.

A NEW APPROACH

The following public affairs plan has been designed to help the Association meet these two challenges and more within the next three to four years. In this report, gimmicks and one-time media interjections have been rejected.

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In the future, news conferences, news releases and other media events, all relating to the Association's public policy positions, should more than take care of OPSBA's day to day media requirements and positioning. In other words, OPSBA's share of media attention will increase once the Association has greater confidence and security in its own policy positions and its own political commentary within the education community.

Once the internal organizational plans of OPSBA become stable the communications department will provide a detailed blueprint relating to the Association's short and long term internal communications and media relations requirements and objectives.

In the meantime, a plan that carefully, but surely simultaneously heightens the profile of public education, public school trustees, their boards of education and their provincial association is required.

This plan must use mass communication techniques and devices to reach into all regions of Ontario, to touch all citizens and be recognized and strongly supported by OPSBA Member Boards.

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This plan must call for innovation and creativity to get the job done, while avoiding expensive commercial rates. This alone, is an enormous challenge.

We have decided to put aside, for the moment, the various messages that we intend to communicate to our public. We know there are many, and sometimes it is difficult to reach agreement on the right message, or how it should be translated. Moreover, the educational experience, being what it is in Ontario, may mean that they can be no single, universal message. This remains to be seen.

In any case, if the political leaders in public education were fresh out of reasons to communicate with their public, this report would serve no purpose and probably would not have been written.

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THE PROGRAM

(BACKGROUND)

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association is a new creation, born from the necessity to provide public school trustees with one organization and once voice. The need for one strong, united voice for public education has dramatically increased. A combination of government legislation and intervention, a changing education landscape and pressures from other school systems have contributed to the current air of confusion and frustration, on the part of the public, surrounding education - particularly public education.

To let this situation remain indefinitely will only create a vacuum that will undoubtedly be filled by other forces and perhaps other school systems.

New and positive initiatives must be designed and implemented by public school trustees to convey to the public the urgency to support and sustain a strong viable system available to citizens, young and old. Above all, taxpayers should be looking to their elected trustees for protection and leadership.

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Member Boards must be reassured that promoting and protecting the excellence and viability of public education will be a priority for the new association.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Since "it is the Association's goal to provide a variety of essential and specialized services to its member boards", then it follows that, to create and provide these services, a comprehensive public affairs program is needed. The program must enable individual Member Boards to converse directly with the taxpayers in their communities, as well as other partners in public education.

The public school boards of Ontario still have the heavy responsibility to provide and to preside over the delivery of quality educational services for all our young people. They must be seen to be performing efficiently and effectively in this vital role.

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As municipal and provincial elections are not due until the fall of 1991, a period of time exists that allows for the development and implementation of a province-wide program to keep the taxpayers aware, informed and supportive of the policies and leadership of their elected trustees.

Fortunately, Ontario already has a network of electronic and print media in place and education is such a universally interesting topic that the message can be delivered to the eagerly awaiting public on a regular basis.

There is such a compelling urgency to communicate with the people who pay the bills, that it would be a dereliction of duty if the Association and its membership do not utilize every opportunity to do so.

To communicate our very special message to our public on a regular and province-wide basis can seem to be an overwhelming and expensive exercise. By using the media wisely and creatively, our public affairs program can enjoy both universality and cost-effectiveness.

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THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS STRATEGY

Although the Association already has many commendable communication services in place, the demand upon the newly-formed organization is such that it calls for a larger all-encompassing master plan. OPSBA currently shares funding of OPEN's campaign. It also supplies Member Boards with a central area for policy decisions and a liaison with provincial government. The missing link is an ability to connect trustees or Boards directly to taxpayers. This should be a paramount objective in future considerations. It is incumbent upon trustees to tell the people who elect them the facts. Once the public is informed in a positive way, it is logical to expect that support will be forthcoming. The new Association is in a position to make this happen.

The program and its many components require an umbrella name such as:

P.S. - FOCUS

Under this designation, the Association can develop a comprehensive program that, if utilized in total by a group of trustees, will enable them to penetrate the inner recesses of every home in their community.

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Everything that the Association is mandated to carry out can only be realized if the communications vehicle is capable of delivering the message to the voters. Every political party knows this fact: Can the protectors of our educational heritage and future afford to ignore the reality of what it takes to curry favour of the public school supporters? The answer is no.

COMPONENTS OF THE STRATEGY

P.S. Cable Television Programs

Entitled P.S., they are produced once or twice a month by OPSBA and made available to every Member Board. It is designed to be less than a half hour to allow the local Board members to bring their comments to the subject under discussion. It will deal with policy topics and be interview style with a set designed to be used regularly. The program will be edited and will include material to illustrate and graphics to emphasize points and figures.

It will be designed to serve the requirements of the cable outlets and will, of course, be open to subjects and personalities suggested by Member Boards. Special consideration must be given to serving the needs of Member Boards in communities where cable television is not always accessible.

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P.S. Radio

On the same basis as cable television only in 3 to 5 minute programs, OPSBA produces radio commentaries on a monthly basis and mails them to local radio stations for use as programming or public service announcements. These deal with policy and current affairs but are not news items. Once again, the active involvement of Member Boards will be sought in the subject matter.

P.S. Community Newspaper Column

There are numerous excellent community newspapers throughout Ontario that publish on a daily or weekly basis. They are oriented to the activities in and around their local markets and to universal topics that relate directly to public schools. OPSBA should make available a regular weekly column entitled **P.S. Focus**, for the use of editors and publishers. It will be non-political but will reflect the OPSBA point of view so that taxpayers may be kept informed of the events and shifting positions taking place in the field of education.

Occasionally, situations call for paid advertising material for these same newspapers. As an additional service OPSBA could provide finished layouts and copy (allowing for local trustee indentification) to be placed at the Member Board's discretion. For many of those local weeklies, the costs for insertions would be very little.

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P.S. Direct Mail/Tax Bills

Unlike MPP's and MP's, school trustees rarely get the opportunity to correspond directly with their constituents. It is extremely expensive. OPSBA will produce generic or specially designed material that allows for local identifications and will be printed on a split-run basis so that the individual Boards could be identified. This material will be provided to municipalities for inclusion in the semi annual tax bills. The Association would attempt to assist boards in negotiating with their municipalities to ensure the inclusion of their material in the tax bills.

P.S. Calendar

As part of the P.S. program, a calendar will be designed and advertising sold. It will highlight yearly events and promote education around the province. It could be produced on a split-run basis to personalize it for Member Boards. With the full participation and support for Member Boards, a P.S. Calendar could be put in over one million households throughout Ontario, totally paid for by one or more very credible advertisers.

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P.S. Professional Development

As one of the key messengers of public education, trustees are a significant component of this program. Their ability to communicate effectively in the mass communications medium must be continually refined through professional development workshops and seminars.

SUMMARY

To ensure continuity and credibility, OPSBA must quickly become identified as a creative leader in offering communications services for Member Boards, who in turn utilize these services to reach their public.

Once the P.S. program is established, then it can be incorporated into an annual event such as **Education Week**. It also can be utilized to identify the sponsorship and publicizing of any special event that might arise. In other words, P.S. becomes the propaganda arm of OPSBA. Once the generic P.S. label is attached to public education, it will be difficult for competitive forces to lay any enforceable claim to the field. OPSBA will represent public education and any other voice will have to be satisfied to speak for their own separate version of education in Ontario.

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COSTS

By developing centralized communication techniques and devices, the Association is able to offer its Member Boards participation in the public affairs program at a substoncially reduced cost.

Electronic Media

For example, to produce a monthly cable and radio program the cost would be approximately $20,000 per month, per board. If the Association produced this program centrally and 10 boards participated, then the cost per board would be $2,000 per program, per month. If the Association produced eight programs per year, the cost per board would be $16,000. per year.

If thirty boards participated, the cost would be reduced to less than $700 per board, per program. Again, if the Association produced eight programs per year, the cost per board would be $5,600 per year.

If sixty boards participated, the cost per board, per month would be under $350. At eight programs per year, the total annual cost for participation in the program would be $2,800.

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Print Media

The newspaper column would likely be at no cost to boards. Starting with just weeklies, it is possible to coordinate the insertion of the P.S. column through the provincial outlet for Ontario's weekly community newspapers. If some cost were involved, it could be absorbed in the Association's annual communications' budget.

The inserts in tax bills would involve some additional costs to participating boards. However, just like the cable T.V. and radio programs, the greater the participation, the lower the cost. Given the potential volume of inserts, the cost could be very attractive.

The Association would prepare at least two to three different copy approaches to tax bill inserts. For example, one might focus on declining provincial grants, another on public school promotion and a third on how new Ministry of Education mandated programs impact on local mill rates.

If it cost a board $10,000 to prepare and insert a special leaflet in the municipal tax bill, consider what it would cost a board if 60 boards, or even 90 boards participated!

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The calendar could be prepared and possibly even distributed at no cost to boards. Yes, some boards do calendars and distribute them to every home or taxpayer in the board's jurisdiction. Most boards do not. As previously stated, a "clean and acceptable" advertising partner could be found.

PACKAGING

The Association could showcase the different services annually. Boards would decide their own participation in the various communication ideas offered in any given year. Some services would involve additional cost, others would involve no extra cost beyond a board's membership fee in the Association.

CONCLUSION

This report represents, in part, a vision or blueprint for new, innovative ways in which OPSBA and its Member Boards can build greater public support and confidence in public schools and for the role that public school boards and individual trustees play in the public education system.

The ideas discussed above can be undertaken in any order. The program is designed to be flexible and adjustable.

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In addition, the public affairs and communications program stretches the Association's services in this area beyond the obvious and routine requirements of our Member Boards. The program attempts to identify ways in which the Association can support the important responsibility and obligation of school boards to reach out to Ontario citizens, to keep them informed, and where need be, renew their support for public education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **From the Operations Committee:**

   "A Blueprint for Reaching Out" be approved and implemented on a phased-in approach based on board responses.

2. **On implementation:**

   That the Association allocate $20,000 from its communications budget for the presentation of the plan to member boards. This would include a short video to compliment the written proposal, and a sample of the monthly cable program.

The recommendations above were approved by the OPSBA Board of Directors in May, 1989. The proposed plan is expected to be ready for release to Member Boards by mid October, 1989.